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Shrinking Prisons, Saving Billions

By THE EDITORIAL BOARD | NY Times

The mandatory sentencing craze that gripped the country four decades ago drove up the state prison population sevenfold — from under 200,000 in the early 1970s to about 1.4 million today — and pushed costs beyond \$50 billion a year. Until recently, it seemed that the numbers would keep growing. But thanks to reforms in more than half the states, the prison census has edged down slightly — by just under 2 percent — since 2009. A new analysis by the Pew Charitable Trusts shows that the decline would have been considerably larger had the other states not been pulling in the opposite direction.

Over the last five years, 29 states have managed to cut their imprisonment rates, 10 of them by double-digit percentages. California, which has been ordered by the Supreme Court to ease extreme prison crowding, led the way with a 17 percent drop, mainly by reducing parole and probation revocations and shifting custody of low-level offenders to counties. Other states reduced prison terms for low-level offenses; diverted some offenders to community supervision; and strengthened parole programs, so that fewer offenders landed back in jail for technical violations like missed appointments or failed drug tests.

Even law-and-order states like Texas, which cut its imprisonment rate by 7 percent, have discovered that they can shrink the prison population without threatening public safety. Investing heavily in drug treatment and community supervision, Texas has avoided nearly \$2 billion in spending on new prisons, while the crime rate has dropped to levels unseen since the 1960s. But even as the national prison population has declined, 20 other states — including Arizona, Arkansas, Pennsylvania and West Virginia — keep sending more people to prison than need to be there.

In West Virginia, the imprisonment rate rose by 17 percent in the same five-year period. The Council of State Governments Justice Center, a corrections policy group, warns that West Virginia's prison population will grow by an additional 18 percent by 2018 — costing the state nearly \$350 million unless its Legislature adopts a pending reform package that includes expanded drug treatment and a new community supervision system that focuses more closely on high-risk offenders. States that lag in reducing their prison populations should swiftly embrace these kinds of reforms.